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Syrians are said to suspend terror role

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WASHINGTON - President Hafez Assad of Syria appears to have ordered at least a temporary halt to government-supported terrorism, a senior US official said yesterday.

American and Western officials, he said, are trying to come up with ways to convince Assad that it is in his interest to make a firm decision no longer to use terrorism as a routine instrument of foreign policy.

The most dramatic Syrian move, as yet unannounced, was the removal of the commander and deputy commander of the air force intelligence. The deputy commander had been implicated in trials in Britain and West Germany in supplying bombs to convicted terrorists.

Curbing Abu Nidal

In addition, sources said, Syria has shut the Damascus offices used by the Abu Nidal terrorist organization. But it has not expelled Abu Nidal's operatives or closed their camp in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

"Assad is under pressure on several fronts," an analyst said. "He has been seriously embarrassed by the London and Berlin trials, he's concerned about the possibility of increasing Western sanctions, he's taking it on the chin these days in Lebanon, his economy is in desperate straits, his health is not good and a certain amount of succession-oriented maneuvering is under way.

"So, at the very least," the analyst said, "he's trying to present an image, at least, of cleaning up his act."

Sources said they expected an announcement soon that Gen. Mohammed Khouli has been removed as head of Air Force Intelligence and given a job with a prestigious-sounding title outside of the intelligence community.

"However it's wrapped," one analyst said, "everyone will know he's been canned."

Khouli has been very close to Assad for many years. He helped to crush the Moslem Brotherhood rebellion in Hama in 1982 and carried out a number of sensitive intelligence and diplomatic missions for the president.

Another dismissal predicted

Sources said that in addition to Khouli, Lt. Col. Haitem Said will also be removed. Said was accused of providing the bomb to Ahmed Nawaf Mansour Hasi that was found to have been used to blow up the German-Arab Friendship Society in Berlin, and to Nezar Hindawi for an attempt to blow up an El Al airliner in London.

The United States has long urged Assad to kick out the Abu Nidal organization. He has refused, in part because that organization is believed to have performed some useful operations for Syria, and in part because to expel it could be interpreted as an admission that Syria has engaged in state-supported terrorism.

In addition, if the group were expelled now, it would be forced to move all its operations to Libya. Syria and Libya are now at odds on policy in Lebanon.

Officials said that Assad does not want to be seen as irrational, like Moammar Khadafy, but rather as a serious statesman whose views must be taken into account on all important Middle East policy issues.

"It's true, he's not like Khadafy," a senior official said. "He's a serious political leader whose commitments, once given, can be counted on."

"We have to be firm with him," the official went on, "but we also have to try to convince him it's in his best interests to downplay terrorism, just as was the case with Saddam Hussein who was persuaded to kick Abu Nidal out of Baghdad." Hussein is the Iraqi president.

In addition, analysts said, Assad's surprising decision to attend last week's Islamic summit conference in Kuwait showed that he was having difficulties.

Iran, which he supports in its war with Iraq, made a strong effort to prevent the conference from taking place in Kuwait, a major financial supporter of Iraq.

Yet Assad not only attended, but he also conferred and was photographed with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, who has been a pariah in much of the Arab world because he supports Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

Assad criticized Egypt's relationship with Israel, but when Mubarak rose to say he could not agree with the criticism but would not reply point by point, even Assad applauded.